

Georgia Department of Human Resources

FOSTER CARE IN GEORGIA

Foster care is a state program that provides temporary substitute homes for children whose families cannot provide a safe and nurturing environment for them. It is one of the many programs administered by the Georgia Department of Human Resources' Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS).

Children in foster care

Children come into the custody of DFCS for many reasons. However, only a parent, guardian, or juvenile court has the authority to place a child in DFCS custody. As of January 2003, about 14,472 children were in state custody. Of these:

- 7,904 were in family foster care;
- 784 were placed in child-caring institutions or hospitals;
- 1,283 were in group homes;
- 2,941 were placed with relatives or were in the non-abusing parents' home until the court could decide legal custody;
- 460 children were in foster care with relatives;
- 401 children were free for adoption and placed in adoptive homes.

Of the 14,472 children in DFCS custody, about 892 are served in intensive, intermediate, or therapeutic settings because they need treatment for serious emotional problems.

The ages of children in DFCS custody range from birth to 21; the average age is about 9. Some 45 percent are white, and 56 percent are African-American. The remaining 5 percent come from other ethnic backgrounds.

Some children remain in foster care throughout their teen years. Nearly 3,992 youth are eligible to receive services through the Independent Living Program, a transition program that prepares teens ages 14-21 for independence and adulthood. Services include financial assistance for tutoring, college, technical school, supervised housing and life skill training such as budgeting, job seeking and job retention. In FFY 2002, 244 youth were enrolled in some type of post-secondary training or college program and 308 secured full-time employment.

About 777 DFCS case managers statewide serve the foster care program. Their responsibilities include:

- Working with birth families on meeting goals outlined in case plans for reunification;
- Selecting and placing the child in a suitable home or other placement option;
- Supporting foster parents in their role as agency partners in providing care for children;
- Working with other community agencies to meet the ongoing needs of children;
- Keeping the court informed about the status of cases.

Foster parents

Foster parents are recruited primarily by county DFCS staff. They look for foster parents who are in good physical and mental health, with homes that meet the minimum standards set forth and approved by the Department of Human Resources. As of January 2003, there were about 3,507 family foster homes in Georgia.

Foster parents provide only temporary care for children, but if a foster child becomes available for adoption, foster parents often adopt the child. In fact, foster parents account for more than 80 percent of DFCS adoptions.

Prospective foster parents must complete 30 hours of pre-service training (GPS/MAPP). Physical exams, drug screens, and criminal record checks are required. Homes also must meet other safety requirements. Foster parents complete 15 hours of parent development training and a re-evaluation every year.

The number of children placed in a home varies from one to six (including the parents' own children), and is predetermined by the parent and the DFCS agency. Foster parents are reimbursed according to the age of the child: birth to 5, \$12.75; 6-12, \$13.50; 13 and above, \$14.25. The rate is higher for children needing medical care or a higher level of supervision. Medical treatment and clothing costs are covered by the agency.

A toll-free foster parent support and information line (1-888-310-8260) is available for foster parents and others wanting information about Georgia's foster care program. The foster care and adoption recruitment intake line is 1-877-210-KIDS.

Citizens review panels and CASA programs

Many citizens take an active role in Georgia's foster care program by serving on a **Citizens Review Panel**. Panel members, who are appointed by a Juvenile or Superior Court judge, review agency case plans for children and make sure that they find permanent homes as quickly as possible. In some counties, a judge does the case review. **CASA volunteers** (Court-Appointed Special Advocates) act on behalf of the court in representing the best interest of children in care during the judicial process.

New directions in the foster care program

- **The First Placement, Best Placement** is a public/private initiative developed to aid agency staff, juvenile courts, families and providers in developing case plans, determining interventions and services, and making placement decisions that assure child safety, permanency and child and family well-being. **First Placement, Best Placement Wrap Around Services** respond to the identified needs of children, birth families, foster parents, and pre-adoptive parents; and help with family reunification, crisis intervention, summer enrichment and the stabilization of children and families.
- **Family conferences** bring relatives, friends, foster parents and professionals together to help the family develop and provide a protection and care plan for their children.
- Most of the children in foster care are reunited with their families. But for some children, reunification may not be the best option. New legislation makes it possible for children who are unlikely to return to their birth family to be placed in a permanent home more quickly. Now, a permanency plan must be determined within 12 months after a child comes into care. Options may include reunification, placement with other relatives or guardian, adoption or another permanent living alternative. Currently, children remain in foster care for an average of one year and seven months.
- **The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program (PSSF)** is managed by the Foster Care Program and services are designed to promote safety and permanence for children and child and family well-being. In FY 2002, a total of 7,629 families received services.